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Central Intelligence Agency



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## DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

29 May 1984

Burma: Getting Tough with the Insurgents

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Summary

The Burmese Army has been engaged since January in a major offensive against the Karen National Union (KNU), an ethnic insurgent group seeking autonomy from Rangoon. The offensive is in response to growing KNU military and terrorist activity, and has involved a substantially larger than normal commitment of resources. The casualty rate has been high. The offensive also differs sharply from previous government counterinsurgency operations in that it appears aimed at establishing permanent government positions near the Thai border. This has strained relations with Bangkok, and although we do not look for a serious conflict between the two countries, Thai antinarcotics operations could be disrupted by a continuing Burmese campaign.

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A New, Get-Tough Campaign

The Burmese Army in January launched its largest offensive in seven years against the Karen National Union (KNU), a 7,000-member ethnic insurgent group that has been seeking autonomy since Burma's independence in 1948. Preparations for the campaign began late last year with the movement of about 10,000 Army troops from three light infantry divisions into the insurgent-controlled Karen state on the Thai border. When heavy fighting began in late January, the Army used air support to help capture two major Karen strongholds--including the number-two base at Mae Taw Wah.

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Office of East Asian Analysis. Information available as of 22 May 1984 was used in its presentation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to Chief, Southeast Asia Division [redacted]

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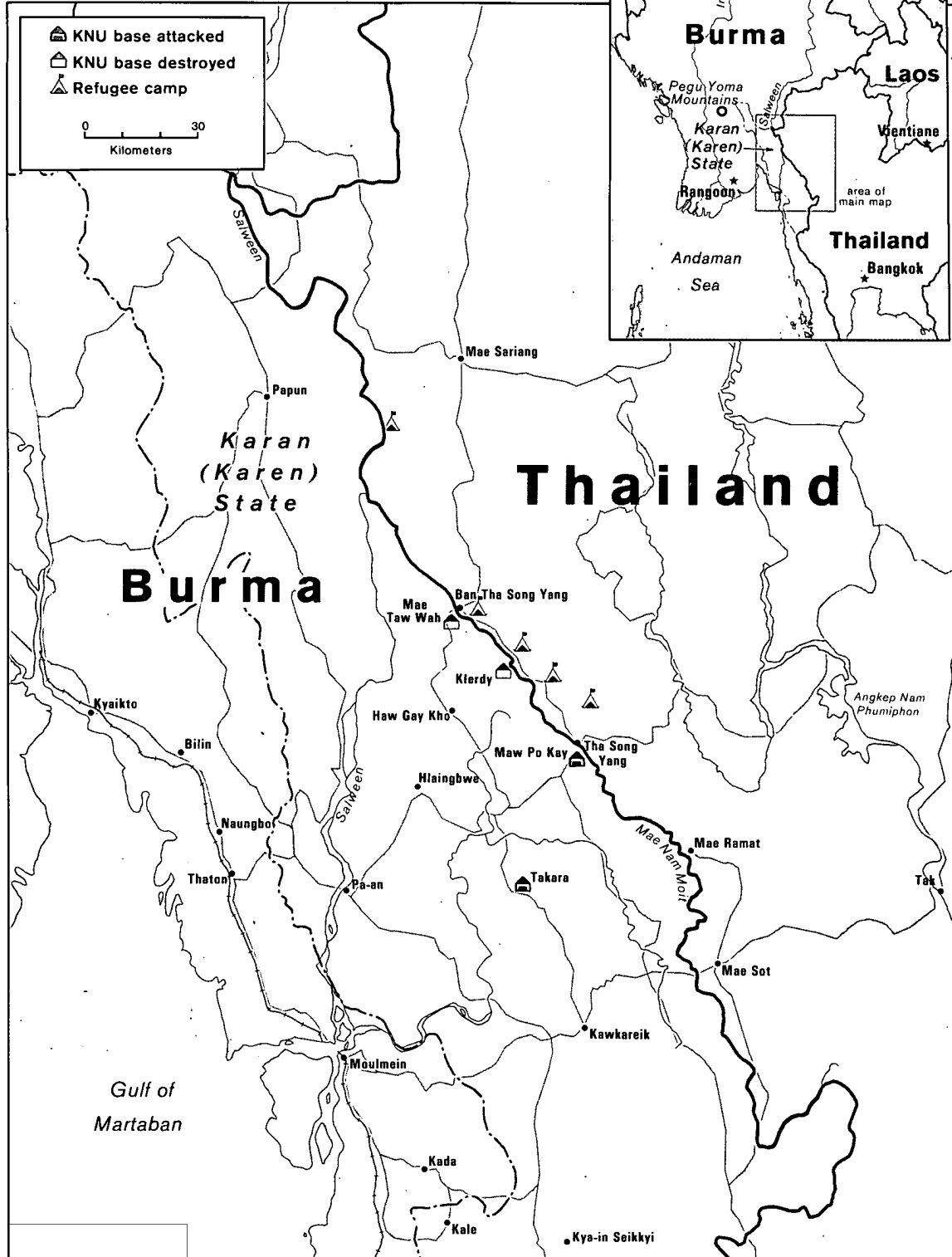
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# Burma Army Offensive Against Karen National Union (KNU)



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Since late February, 3,000 Army troops have been battering Maw Po Kay, the largest Karen stronghold and, until mid-January, home of the insurgents' clandestine radio station. The 700 insurgents have been able to hold off Army encroachments thus far because their base is flanked on three sides by the Moit River, which forms the border with Thailand, and the remaining side is heavily mined. While continuing its assault against Maw Po Kay, the Army in early April began an attack on 2,000 KNU troops at Wanghka--a major KNU trading center--and on 12 April captured an insurgent sawmill at Takara. Battles at these three insurgent camps are continuing. [redacted]

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Information on casualties is sketchy, but [redacted] unusually heavy. Unconfirmed press reports claim that Army casualties are running double the 70 to 100 per month normally recorded in Burmese counterinsurgency operations, largely a result of widespread malaria and insurgent mines. In addition, both sides apparently have adopted a "no-prisoner" policy. [redacted] captured Karen insurgents are interrogated and then executed; [redacted] insurgents executed an entire Burmese Army company caught destroying property and assaulting Karen villagers. [redacted]

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This latest campaign differs from past offensives in other important aspects as well. The Army traditionally has relied on hit-and-run tactics, making only temporary inroads into insurgent-held territory. In this latest offensive, however, Rangoon has committed enough resources to support a sustained campaign aimed at crippling the KNU's sources of revenue, which include gem and timber smuggling and taxation on goods transported through KNU-controlled territory.\* Once the marketplaces, sawmills, and border crossings are captured, Rangoon plans to occupy them and conduct political indoctrination of villagers. The Army has already stationed troops at Mae Taw Wah, and Immigration and Customs personnel have set up posts there. [redacted] And press reports indicate that the Army has constructed a helicopter pad in the Karen state to facilitate resupply during the coming rainy season. [redacted]

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### Striking Back at KNU Successes

Rangoon's determination to clear out the KNU probably stems from the insurgents' increased terrorist activity in the past two years--especially their strikes in government-controlled areas. For example, the KNU:

\*Unlike most of the other insurgent groups operating in Burma, the KNU is not involved in narcotics production and trafficking. [redacted]

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- Attacked a police station and radio station in Rangoon in September 1982, the first such foray into the capital since 1975.
- In April 1983 attempted to hijack a Burma Airways plane in a town near the Gulf of Martaban.
- Raided a cement factory under construction near Pa-an, the capital of the Karen state, and kidnapped and released a French technician and his wife, an incident that gained considerable media attention for the KNU cause.
- Bombed a Rangoon train in January 1984, killing several people. The government subsequently heightened security amid reports of plans for additional bombings in Rangoon.
- Infiltrated 60 insurgents into Rangoon in an unsuccessful effort to disrupt national Union Day festivities in February 1984.
- Launched attacks in the Pegu Yoma Mountains north of Rangoon, an area that had been free from insurgent activity.

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Rangoon may also have been concerned about the KNU's growing cooperation with other insurgent groups. In 1982 the KNU completed the constitution of the National Democratic Front, an alliance of nine insurgent groups established by the KNU in the mid-1970s. The Front operates a joint military force of 500 men, over half of which is supplied by the KNU. During the current Army offensive, the KNU has augmented its forces with 200 troops and possibly some supplies from other members of the Front,

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The KNU also helped form the 200-man Muslim Liberation Army (MLA) on the Thai border in mid-1982, which it now trains and commands. The Karen, who are mostly Christian, successfully appealed to the Muslims to join them in the struggle against the predominantly Buddhist leadership.

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### Problems for Rangoon

Rangoon faces significant problems in establishing control over the border area. The government has never had much popular support there, and the current offensive has worsened the relationship because of the Army's destruction of personal property, attacks on women, and its use of forced labor.

Karen villagers are required to provide staples to the Army. If they do not comply, their village is destroyed.

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[redacted]

The insurgents continue to control much of the countryside and can therefore disrupt the Army's supply and communication lines. A prolonged occupation would stretch the Army's limited supply of weapons, ammunition, and available troops. Even now, the Army is facing stiffened opposition as the KNU recovers from its early losses. The Thai press reported that the KNU recaptured its sawmill at Maw Po Kay and trapped troops inside the Army-occupied base at Mae Taw Wah. Also, Karen insurgents have attacked several towns in the government-controlled area around Pa'an and burned down the largest sugar mill in Burma. [redacted]

[redacted]

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The success of the operation will ultimately depend on Rangoon's staying power. If the Army maintains a major presence in the Karen state, we would expect a gradual weakening of the resistance--perhaps with other insurgent groups moving in to take over the Karen's lucrative smuggling business. If, however, the Burmese follow past practices and withdraw, we would look for only temporary disruptions in the smuggling trade and a renewal of Karen terrorist activity. [redacted]

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#### Relations with Thailand Strained

In any event, the fierce fighting and the prolonged operation has strained Rangoon's relations with Bangkok. In the attempt to capture the insurgent stronghold at Maw Po Kay in March, 200 Army troops crossed into Thailand to attack the base from the rear. A two-day battle with Thai border police ensued in which two Thai and perhaps as many as 20 Burmese were killed. In late February, the Burma Army arrested a Thai couple operating a sawmill in Burma. Thai authorities are negotiating for the couple's release. [redacted]

[redacted]

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Thailand has also borne the brunt of protecting civilians along the border. It has evacuated more than 2,000 Thai from towns along the border, and is providing humanitarian aid to about 10,000 Karen civilians who fled to Thailand as a result of the Army offensive. [redacted]

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The Burmese, for their part, are concerned over Thai sympathy for the KNU, which Bangkok probably views as a buffer between Thailand and the Burma Communist Party. Although there is no evidence that Bangkok actively supports the KNU armed resistance, the Thai press has been sympathetic to the Karen's plight during the Burma Army offensive. Thai in the border area have long-established business ties with the Karen. According to the US Embassy in Bangkok, the Thai blackmarket enables the Karen to trade lumber, cattle, and other goods for arms, food, and medicine. [redacted]

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Although we doubt that current tensions will erupt into open hostility between Rangoon and Bangkok, prolonged Burmese Army

[redacted]

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[redacted]

operations could have a serious impact on Thailand's attempts to bring its own border area under control. Thai operations against narcotics traffickers frequently spill over into Burma, and Bangkok has carefully avoided mounting major operations when Burmese Army troops were nearby. Any permanent Burmese Army presence in the border area, however, may force Bangkok to reduce its antinarcotics efforts or risk increased clashes with the Burmese.

[redacted]

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[redacted] Moreover, the Burmese Government has traditionally allied with some narcotics trafficking groups while mounting operations against other insurgents, a practice that could also undermine Thai efforts.

[redacted]

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Chronology

23 January 1984	Burmese Army attack begins on Mae Taw Wah
27 January	Doi Kham falls to the Army
28 January	Mae Taw Wah falls to the Army
28 January	Insurgents attack Bilin
13 February	Klerdy and Tha Lu Dae fall to the Army
14 February	Insurgents burn buildings in eight towns as well as largest sugar mill in Burma, take 14 hostages
18 February	Insurgents trap Burma Army in fallen base at Mae Taw Wah
24 February	Two bases (Ti Ka Por and a base on Luer Ka Chor Mountain) around Maw Po Kay fall to the Army
28 February	Army attack begins on Maw Po Kay and Takara
3 March	Two KNU terrorists arrested in Rangoon as 50 try to penetrate the Delta region
9 March	Insurgents retake Maw Po Kay sawmill
10 March	Insurgents attack Kya-in Seikkyi
12 March	Burma Army violates Thai territory near Maw Po Kay
24 March	Insurgents attack a Burma Army battalion near Taungoo
6 April	Army attack begins on Wangkha
10 April	200 Insurgents attack two outposts of the Burmese Naval Base south of Mergui
3 May	Army attack begins on Phalu
5 May	Insurgent base near Three Pagodas Pass falls
18 May	Army withdraws from Klerdy and Phalu

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## National Democratic Front\*

<u>Organization</u>	<u>Strength</u>
Karen National Union	7,000
Kachin Independence Organization	5,000
Karenni National Progressive Party	500-1,200
Shan State Progressive Party	2,000-4,000
New Mon State Party	200-300
Pa-O National Organization	400
Lahu National United Party	500
Rakhine Liberation Party	300
Palaung State Liberation Organization	400

**Total forces****16,000-19,000**

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\*The goal of the National Democratic Front is "to establish a new federal union composed of independent national democratic federal republics." In reality these groups--except the KNU--are primarily involved in narcotics and smuggling activities.

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